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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: U.S.-TAIWAN RELATIONS

Summary: Taiwan's major Chinese-language dailies focused July 14-16 news coverage on the legislators' elections and the presidential election slated for early 2008, and on a rally in Taipei Saturday marking the 20th anniversary of the lifting of martial law in Taiwan. In terms of editorials and commentaries, a news analysis in the pro-unification "United Daily News" discussed Washington's reported suspension of the sale of F-16 fighter jets to Taiwan. The article criticized the Chen Shui-bian administration's manipulation of the referendum on the island's bid to join the United Nations under the name "Taiwan" and called the suspension of the arms deal "the price for hugging the United States' legs [i.e., acting like a docile child]." A column in the "United Daily News" also lashed out at the Chen administration's efforts in pushing for the signing of a free trade agreement with the United States. An op-ed in the pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times," written by Richard Holloran, a writer based in Hawaii, said the United States' support for Taiwan is dwindling. A separate op-ed in the "Taipei Times," written by Professor John Copper at Rhodes College in Memphis, however, said "in coming months, it is difficult to conceive of Taiwan not becoming an issue in the U.S. presidential campaign." End summary.

A) "The Price for Hugging the United States' Legs"

Journalist Lee Chih-teh noted in an analysis in the pro-unification "United Daily News" [circulation: 400,000] (7/15):

"The Executive Yuan, via powerful manipulation, has successfully reversed [a previous decision by its Referendum Review Committee] regarding the referendum on 'Taiwan's bid to join the United Nations under the name Taiwan.' Before the applause for celebrating such a success has even died out, the United States has already conveyed a message of penalty -- namely, the Taiwan military's 'Feng Sun Project' [to purchase 66 F-16C/D fighter jets from the United States] has been suspended as a result of the U.S. State Department's objection. One cannot help but wonder if the Green politicians can understand that this is the price they have to pay for 'hugging the United States' legs [a Chinese expression that roughly translates as 'behaving like a docile child toward one's parents']..."

"On Taiwan's part, following the power transfer in Taiwan in 2000, relations between two sides of the Taiwan Strait first came to a standstill because the DPP had deep doubts about Beijing, which, on the other hand, said it would 'listen to [President Chen Shui-bian's] words and watch his deeds.' After that, cross-Strait relations quickly deteriorated because Chen and the Green politicians constantly manipulated ethnic issues and cross-Strait conflicts for political gains. The collapse in cross-Strait relations left Taiwan no option in the game played by Washington, Beijing and Taipei but to lean entirely toward the United States. ...

"'Hugging the legs' [of the United States] is of course a viable strategy if one just looks at the conflicts between the United States and China. But the question is that other than bilateral conflicts, Washington and Beijing still share common interests. The top priority [for the two] right now is nothing but 'cross-Strait stability and unchanged status quo,' and any side that seeks to affront such common interests will have to be penalized. ..."

B) "What Kind of a Policy Is this?"

Journalist Sun Yang-ming wrote in the "United Notes" column in the pro-unification "United Daily News" [circulation: 400,000] (7/14):

"... In addition to using the 'transit stops [in the United States]' to fool the Taiwan people [into thinking the United States still strongly backs Taiwan], the Bian administration's relations toward the United States can now only focus on the signing of a so-called 'free trade agreement' (FTA). Without a doubt, it will be great news for Taiwan if a U.S.-Taiwan FTA is signed. But anyone with common sense knows that this would be 'mission impossible' during the term of office of the Bian administration.

"Former AIT Taipei Director Douglas Paal once lashed out at the Bian administration, saying that the latter must have ulterior political intents behind its move to push for an FTA with the United States. In fact, even if Paal did not mention it, anyone in the diplomatic circle knows that an FTA is a highly political matter. If one looks at the countries that have signed FTAs with the United States, including Israel, Singapore, and South Korea, one will see that each of them is a country of high strategic importance. Isn't Taiwan hitting its head against the wall when it fails to define its importance [to the United States]...while still pushing for an FTA with the United States? The Americans will naturally be suspicious of the Bian administration's intentions behind its push for the FTA. ...

"In addition, given the great political significance in signing an FTA, it will surely create great conflict between Washington and Beijing. Does it sound likely that the Bush administration would confront Beijing just to act in concert with a government's policy that runs counter to its own interests? Should the Bush administration really agree to sign an FTA with the Bian administration, or even just to discuss it, it will be regarded as a move to endorse the Bian administration's Taiwan independence policy. Will the United States ask for trouble? Can the Bush administration be that stupid? ..."

C) "US Support for Taipei Dwindling"

Richard Holloran, a writer based in Hawaii, opined in the pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times" [circulation: 30,000] (7/15):

"... US support for far-away Taipei is dwindling, making it possible that Washington might not help defend Taiwan against China. Consider the subtle change in US President George W. Bush's stance. Shortly after he took office in 2001, the president told a TV interviewer that the US would do 'whatever it takes' to protect Taiwan. ... In an address in Prague last month, the president praised Taiwan and South Korea for marching toward democracy. But he said not a word about the US helping to defend Taiwan against a China that has repeatedly said it will use force if Taiwan does not submit peacefully. This turnabout has been several years in the making. ...

"Political leaders in Taiwan, notably President Chen Shui-bian, have not helped their cause. Chen stirred the wrath of both Beijing and Washington recently by announcing he would hold a referendum to gauge domestic support for a proposal that Taiwan apply for UN membership using the name 'Taiwan.' ... Taiwan has also lost US support by appearing to be unwilling to defend itself. Taipei has dithered over the purchase of a large arms package that Bush offered in 2001 and US officers have said that Taiwan's forces, while showing signs of improvement, have been slow to modernize. The consequence of US failure to defend Taiwan would be profound. ...

"Acquiescing in China's takeover of Taiwan would jeopardize US naval supremacy in the western Pacific and to give China control of the

northern entrance of the South China Sea, through which more shipping passes than through the Suez and Panama canals combined. To abandon a fledgling democracy would undercut the ability of any administration in Washington, whether Republican or Democratic, to persuade other countries to undertake democratic reforms. Moreover, there is no guarantee that China would be satisfied with conquering Taiwan. Beijing is acquiring the capability to project power beyond Taiwan into the rest of Asia and the Pacific. ..."

D) "Taiwan and the Next US President"

John Copper, a professor of International Studies at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee, opined in the pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times" [circulation: 30,000] (7/15):

"... In fact, former American Institute in Taiwan director Raymond Burghardt has pointed out that none of the candidates has voiced an opinion on Taiwan and probably won't. In other words, Taiwan is not going to be an issue in the coming US elections. Not exactly true. While the candidates have not set forth a position on the 'Taiwan issue,' it is possible to glean something about their stances. They have talked about Taiwan before and one can guess how each might treat Taiwan as president. ...

"All of the candidates, Democrats and Republicans, have enunciated a positive view of Taiwan's democracy. But this is less important than the matter of whether the US will protect Taiwan. The point is that Taiwan's political system doesn't matter if it is absorbed by China. In coming months, it is difficult to conceive of Taiwan not becoming an issue in the US president campaign. It has been in every campaign for more than half a century. Military strategists see the Taiwan Strait as the world's number one flashpoint. The US and a fast rising China differ on Taiwan's future and that is an issue worth debating."

YOUNG